

Prepared Remarks of U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
Peruvian Paintings Repatriation Ceremony
September 5, 2014

Good morning. My name is Preet Bharara and I am the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

Today I am proud to return to the Republic of Peru nine paintings of great cultural significance. These paintings had been illegally looted from a church in Lima and smuggled out of Peru, in order to be trafficked on the international art market. They found their way to auction houses in Iowa and New York City, where they were being offered for sale.

I am joined here this morning by our partners in this investigation – as in so many other cases involving stolen or forged artworks, among other matters – by the FBI. Here from the FBI are George Venizelos, the Assistant Director-in-Charge of the FBI in New York, and Assistant Special Agent-in-Charge Belle Chen. The FBI case agent on this investigation is Special Agent Meridith Savona.

Also standing here are the career prosecutors from my Office who, working with the FBI, accomplished the return of these important works of art. Sharon Cohen Levin is the Chief of the Money Laundering and Asset Forfeiture Unit, and this investigation was led by Assistant U.S. Attorney Christine I. Magdo.

We are also joined by Mr. Harold Forsyth, Ambassador of Peru, Ambassador Gustavo Meza Cuadra, Permanent Representative of Peru to the United Nations, and Mrs. Maria Teresa Merino, Consul General of Peru in New York.

After an investigation by the FBI, the paintings were determined to be the same paintings that were stolen from Peru. They date back to the 18th century, and were all painted by the same artist, Miguel Cabrera, a Mexican painter.

Cabrera is considered one of the most important painters of his time in New Spain, an area which included present-day Mexico and Central America. These paintings, all of which are religious in nature, are typical of this artist.

We have on display today what is perhaps the most famous of the nine paintings, “Resurrection of Lazarus,” one of the finest examples of Cabrera’s talent. This painting depicts Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life four days after his burial, to the astonishment of onlookers.

The other eight paintings, depicting other scenes from the life of Christ – which are also being returned to the Republic of Peru – are shown in the photographs that are on display.

Today's event is yet another example of my Office's commitment to assuring that stolen artwork, especially artwork that is such an important part of a nation's cultural heritage, does not find a safe haven for resale in the Southern District of New York or elsewhere in the U.S.